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Context-bound Islamic theodicies: the tsunami as supernatural retribution *versus* natural catastrophe in Southern Thailand

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Abstract

After the tsunami of 26 December 2004, local discourses in the prevalently Muslim Satun province in Southern Thailand were characterized by religious interpretations of the disaster. The range of Islamic interpretations varied, and was far from homogeneous. Statements are framed in plural theodicies and ultimately impute disasters to human responsibility, in apparent contrast to both scientific explanations and other Islamic tenets. The aim of this article is to present the range of theodicies associated with the event and to analyse their use in relation to the specific socio-historical and ethno-political context, in the words of people belonging to the Islamic and Buddhist religious elites. In these examples religious discourses leave behind the theological universalistic explanations of the existence of suffering and evil to become context-bound commentaries on the state of morality of local communities, with the aim of defining social boundaries.

Introduction

When the tsunami generated by an earthquake off the Indonesian coasts brought its devastation on 26 December 2004, I was conducting anthropological research in Southern Thailand, in Satun, one of four provinces with a Muslim majority in Thailand (the other three are Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat).

In the aftermath of tsunami the local discourse could be distinguished into a prevailing Islamic interpretation of the tsunami as divine retribution contra a Buddhist explanation of it as a natural phenomenon. People belonging to the two faiths reflected upon the interpretations of those following the other religion. However, the interplay and reciprocal consideration of these apparently quite contrasting views testifies to the relevance of the local context and circumstances. The range of Islamic interpretations varied, and was far from homogeneous. We can trace this variety of discourses to opposing Islamic theological conceptions on human responsibility and predestination (see Watt 1948). Statements by my informants are framed in

plural theodicies (I can preliminarily define theodicy as the theological and/or existential problem of reconciling the concept of a merciful, just and omnipotent god with the existence of evil and unjust human suffering) and ultimately impute disasters to human responsibility. In truth, the heterogeneity of discourses in Satun, especially among Muslims, should not be considered at odds with an ideal doctrinal uniformity since this variability has been recognized as a characteristic trait of Islamic practice (see for example: Chester 2005, p.325; Homan 2001, p.17; Sachedina 1999, p.65). The aim of this article is to present the Islamic theodicies associated with the event and how the local interpretations are anchored to the specific local socio-historical circumstances. In doing this, I take distance from other (mainly statistics driven) researches conducted in the area which advance the hypothesis of a correlation between local responses to disasters and provincial territory in terms of a high/low 'collective efficacy' which remains undefined and that would be the fruit of a general 'Thai belief system' and a less specified 'local history' (I am referring to the study by Paton et al. (2008)). In the study by Paton *et alia* the suggestion that religion, although unrelated to collective efficacy and initially considered irrelevant to the measuring, might affect resilience is accompanied by admitting a lack of knowledge of the way this mechanism would operate (Paton et al. 2008:117). This kind of investigation does not attempt to assess further the uniformity (or lack thereof) of such a belief system.

In sharp contrast to the study mentioned above, other researchers with a pluralistic methodological approach could identify in Phangnga and Krabi provinces the relevance of religious discourses which local Buddhists and Muslims supplied to explain the disaster (Rigg et al. 2005:376–377). In recording the high level of cohesion of some Muslim communities, these researchers illustrate the socio-economic processes underlying this phenomenon and the role played by social capital (Rigg et al. 2005:375–376). Feeling much in tune with this latter kind of perspective, I claim that local theodicies are used not only to explain the natural hazard but also to assert the inclusion or exclusion of certain groups of people from an ideal Islamic community historically anchored to the territory, which can be identified with the four southern Muslim provinces of Thailand.

The Thai southern region has been historically characterized by a persisting ethno-political tension between the Malay-Muslims and the Siamese (later Thai) government. The historical definition and disputes over the Thai-Malay border and the possible annexation of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat territories (once forming the ancient Patani Kingdom, and where the Muslims represent nowadays between 70 and 82 percent of the population) to British Malaya was settled in 1946. Satun, formerly part of Kedah Sultanate and which was assigned

to Siam by the Anglo-Siam Treaty of 1909, has been quite peripheral to the major insurgency conflict and never demonstrated secessionist tendencies. Of the four Muslim provinces, Satun is considered the one that has reached a higher degree of integration to the Buddhist society, also from a linguistic point of view (Malay speakers are according to the Census of 2000 only about 10 percent). Since the 1950s (and more intensively from 1960) the Thai government has issued policies of resettlement in order to affect the regional ratio of the population, primarily by selling land to Buddhists coming from other regions of the country (Arong 1989:100; Cornish 1997:6).

Methodological note

I base my theoretical analysis on bibliographic research on Buddhist and Islamic theodicy. The main source of material is represented by data I collected in the Satun province from December 2004 to March 2005, and from March to June 2006, through a prolonged involvement with the local community, participant observation, individual as well as focus group interviews. Apart from the daily discussions and conversations with friends, informants and acquaintances during the first three months following the catastrophe, I collected 44 semi-structured interviews with local fishermen and the Muslim people directly affected by the tsunami and residing in coastal villages, with prominent religious figures, and with government officers at both provincial and district levels. I conducted personally all the interviews, aided by my long-term assistant for translations.¹

Since I was also interested in the views expressed by the Islamic religious élites, I gathered locally produced VCDs (the term stays for Video Compact Disc, a digital video storage which uses the compression MPEG and with an image quality inferior to DVD), and other visual material which flooded the local market, all with marked religious content. Local Muslims referred constantly to these and other videos. A teacher of a local *madrassa*, whom I call here by the pseudonym Sulaiman, made a VCD which was edited in three different versions. The VCDs' narrations and dialogues were all integrally transcribed in Thai and translated into English in order to carry out a comparison, beyond an analysis of the visual layout and editing. These visual items are examples of that popular culture of disasters which Couch (2000) and Quarantelli (2003) indicate as one of the important fields of future investigations. A broader analysis of these materials is presented elsewhere (Merli 2005). This kind of multiple approach (see Quarantelli 2003) for the study of disasters allows the

collection of those hidden histories and religious attitudes which do not surface with other kinds of sampling and research (Chester and Duncan 2007, p. 212; Chester, Duncan and Dibben 2008, pp. 217, 225). The material thus obtained has been analysed identifying the explanatory theodicies and inter-religious opinions on these, the changes in the fishermen's perception of the natural environment (not specifically addressed in this article), and the use of discourses on moral status and defilement to define social boundaries (a theme which is notoriously at the centre of Mary Douglas' work *Purity and Danger*).

Damage in Satun Province and new infrastructures

According to the 2000 Thailand census 67.8 percent of Satun population is Muslim and 31.9 percent Buddhist (National Statistical Office 2001). The coastal areas of Satun which were affected by the tsunami are populated prevalently by Muslims and are concentrated in four districts, namely Mueang, Tha Pae, La-Ngu and Thung Wa, involving 17 sub-districts (*tamboon*) and 70 villages (*muban*), and affecting to varying degrees 3,028 families for a total of 13,626 people. The body count was limited to 6 casualties, and the injured numbered 21. Property (82 houses) and extensive agricultural areas (450 *rai* of watermelon plantations and 132 *rai* of rice fields) were damaged.² The greatest losses were registered in the fishing sector, with 36 big trawlers, 644 small fishing boats, 1,653 sets of fishing equipment, 1,182 aquatic farms, 5 fishing farms on rafts, and 4 tourist boats seriously damaged or destroyed. In the Satun coastal area, as well as in other Thai provinces ravaged by the tsunami, the government deployed warning towers connected to the National Disaster Warning Centre (NDWC), which issues early warnings on the ocean's level in collaboration with other international watch organizations.

Anthropological approaches to the study of disasters

The tsunami of 26 December 2004 brought forth to international attention the fact that certain remote areas can be dangerous also for 'us' Westerners and not only to populations belonging to the elsewhere. This discourse 'serves as justification for western interference and intervention in the affairs of those regions for *our* and *their* sakes' (Bankoff 2003, p.14). This hegemonic discourse emerged in the 1990s and is usually disguised through a specific

terminology that includes terms such as 'vulnerability' and 'relief', replacing the historically antecedent discourses of sanitation (tropicality) and colonialism (underdevelopment) so that it has led us from 'primarily disease-ridden regions into poverty-stricken ones, and now depicts them as disaster-prone' (Bankoff 2003, pp.14ff.). Springing from this background, the term vulnerability maintains the characteristic of a diagnosis, applied by outsiders to define a situation perceived as dangerously out of control (Furedi 2007, p.487).

The anthropological study of disasters should investigate how these events affect the relationship between the ideological and the material, the 'ideologies of human-earthly and human-supernatural relations' (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002, p.11). Anthropologists define disasters 'in terms of a seamless web of relations that link society to environment and to culture' (Bankoff 2003, p.155) and do not dissociate the human sphere from the natural. Despite the importance of recording the facts in the immediacy of the event, it is nevertheless the unfolding over time which is interesting for an ethnographic study, because disasters are 'processual phenomena' (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002, pp.3, 12–13). In carrying out this kind of investigation, it is possible to delineate the existence of 'disaster subcultures' which are strongly contextualized especially in their response and reaction to natural hazards (see Gaillard et al. 2008).

The historical development of the explanations of disasters has been described as a transition from a view of them as 'Acts of God', through considering them 'Acts of Nature', to reach finally the contemporary idea of disasters as 'Acts of Men and Women' (Quarantelli 2001, pp.3–4 cit. in Furedi 2007, p.483). These explanations, rather than being mutually exclusive, can and in fact do coexist in the same social context, and geom mythology is a feature of contemporary societies (Chester 2005, p.320; Chester and Duncan 2007, p.208; Furedi 2007, p.484). The analysis of these ideas provides the elements for understanding the social construction of the environment.

The disaster can be disembodied from an otherwise benign superhuman entity, say nature, utilizing the 'monster' as a powerful symbol: the natural becomes unnatural, the violence of nature is dehumanized, formless, preying upon humans (Hoffman 2002, pp.126–128). Nature's benign aspect and the 'monster' can be quite clearly distinguished by employing contrasting terms, as is the case for example in several cultures of Southeast Asia, where different words mark the distinction between

a nature tamed and manipulated for human interests (Thai: *thammachaat*; Malaysia/Indonesian: *taman*; and Burmese: *thaba-wà*) and one that connotes a wild, rustic and untamed space that is often associated

with evil spirits and that should only be entered with care (Thai: *pa thuan*; Malaysia/Indonesian: *hutan*; and Burmese *tàw*). (Rigg 1997, pp.46–48 cit. in Bankoff 2003, p.25)

Due to its etymology *thammachaāt* is a complex concept, and Buddhādāsa Bikkhu in his 'ecological hermeneutics' identifies it with *dhamma*, as the Thai term corresponds to the Pali *dhammajāti* (Swearer 1997, pp.24–25). Humans, animals and nature are interdependent, and personal well-being is interdependent with the well-being of everything else: 'outwardly, *thamachāt* means physical nature. But the inner truth of nature is *dhammadhātu*, the essential or fundamental nature of *dhamma*, namely, the interdependent co-arising nature of things...' (Swearer 1997, p.29).

The ideological: Theodicies

Theodicy is the problematization of and the attempt to resolve the contradiction between on the one hand the existence of evil and unjust suffering, and on the other hand God's major attributes, namely 'universal benevolence, omniscience, and omnipotence' (Obeyesekere 1968, p.8; see also Kaufman 2005, p.17; Mackie 1997, p.78; Sachedina 1999, p.65; Sharma 1973, p.348).

When people resort to the responsibility of a deity to explain a disaster, certain characteristics usually ascribed to the divinity are therefore explicitly called into question, especially in the case of monotheistic religions. The hidden problem of theodicy is however the contradiction between omnipotence and necessity, 'to affirm the necessary rightness of things without simultaneously subjecting God to necessity' (Ormsby 1984, p.264). The task of reconciling these statements is theodicy in its classical sense (Chester 1998, p.488; Ormsby 1984, p.3). The term, in this meaning, was coined by Leibniz in 1710, but has been used also to refer to the broader, and in fact universal, human questions of the suffering of good people and the lack of justice in the affairs of the world and is therefore eminently existential (Kaufman 2005, p.17; Sharma 1973, p.348). Max Weber (1963[1922]) uses the term theodicy also to mean the solution to the problem posed by theodicy itself (see Obeyesekere 1968, p.10). I will refer briefly to some major characteristics of the theorization of theodicy in relation to Buddhism and Islam, before dealing with the post-tsunami local discourses on theodicy in Satun which include both faiths.

The consideration of the doctrine of *karma* as a Buddhist theodicy has been at the centre of a long debate, since in Buddhism there is not an omnipotent God to be called into question. Obeyesekere proposes a definition of theodicy which would apply to all religions, including also the doctrine of *karma* in the definition: '*when a religion fails logically to explain human suffering or fortune in terms of its system of beliefs, we can say that a theodicy exists*' (Obeyesekere 1968, p.11, emphasis in the original). Actually, Max Weber considered *karma* the most complete solution to theodicy, a 'self-contained cosmos of ethical retribution' (Weber 1963[1922], p.145). However, in popular Buddhism and Hinduism *karma* is not a logical solution to theodicy 'since it points to an ultimate force that cannot be comprehended in logical terms' (Keyes 1983a, p.15). At the popular level we find propitiation of deities, magic, and forms of idolatry which are considered heresy in doctrinal Buddhism. There also exist mechanisms of merit transference and actions to counter *karma* which belong exclusively to secular Buddhism (Obeyesekere 1968, pp.22–26; Sharma 1973, pp.351, 360), where the concept is applied for a condition in which there is nothing to do but resort to religious dogmas. In these circumstances, *karma* is presented more as an impersonal force, deprived of an agent (Keyes 1983a, pp.3, 15; 1983b, pp.264–265, 267). Explanations offering *karma* as *causa finalis* and natural forces as *causa efficiens* can be interwoven (Keyes 1983a, p.21; see also Sharma 1973, pp.357, 359).

Whereas leading Islamic theodicy discourses are decisively theistic, there are two opposing trends which can be traced to the two main textual sources; in the Qur'an the focus is on divine omnipotence (or sovereignty) and human responsibility, while in the tradition (*sunna*) there are conceptions which are foreign to the Qur'an, and which are close to pre-Islamic fatalistic ideas (Watt 1948, p.29). The traditions,

...though they mention God, at times tend to be atheistic. The outstanding fact is that human life is controlled and fixed; the controlling forces are mostly thought of as vague, mysterious and impersonal, like the Pen and the Book; and may even remain unmentioned, as in the statement that "what reaches you could not possibly have missed you."³ (Watt 1948, p.20)

At times the definition of the agency of this predetermination is vague, and these conceptions are condemned and opposed in the Qur'an although they 'continued to be held by Muslims, and even, imperceptibly, made their way into orthodox teaching' (Watt 1948, p.20). Without losing sight of the existence of this dual influence, in Islam the main debate has followed the two main schools reflecting on the problem of evil. The Mu'tazilite school of

theology originated in the 8th century CE, its main points were 'the notion of an objective, intellectually discernible good and evil' and 'the doctrine of the optimum' (Ormsby 1984, p.16 and pp.21–22). The Mu'tazilites combined the idea of free will (and therefore human responsibility) with a rational divine justice (Sachedina 1999, p.75). The main problem ascribed to free-will theodicies is that it is difficult to accept its explanation for the massive destruction caused by natural disasters, since 'it is obvious that such suffering is not proportionate to the abuses of free will by humans' (Howard-Snyder, Bergmann and Rower 1997, p.136), although others oppose the argument that the excess recognized in the punishment depends on the human relativistic judgment of intensity (Hick 1997, p.277).

By contrast, the Ash'arite school of theology founded during the 10th century CE (mainly in reaction to the Mu'tazilite school) rejected free will and elaborated a theodicy considering only the unlimited omnipotence of God, which cannot be questioned (Badry and Lewis 2009, p.566; Ormsby 1984, pp.17–18, 24–26; Sachedina 1999, p.76). The Ash'arite view prevailed as 'orthodox', but was mitigated with Mu'tazilite tones (Ormsby 1984, pp.237–248, 251–258). In the Ash'arite view earthquakes occur by divine decree and the places affected are selected (Ormsby 1984, pp.261–262). Islam has an instrumentalist view of suffering, and considers it purposeful (Chester 2005, p.325; Chester and Duncan 2007, p.209; Chester, Duncan and Dibben 2008, p.217; Sachedina 1999, p.68). The suffering of children can be interpreted as instructive for the adults, assuming an educational value; as admonition, it is explained according to a free-will theodicy model (Ormsby 1984, p.244; Sachedina 1999, pp.70, 79).

To consider disasters in a theological frame is not a phenomenon limited to societies we would consider less developed or more 'traditional' but is a pattern operating in the western world as well, and the development of theodicies spans the centuries (Chester 2005, pp.321ff.). After the earthquake of Lisbon in 1755 the problem of theodicy was geared towards suffering caused by human agency (Chester 2005, p.320). However, theodicy of natural disasters resurfaces regularly.

Local theodicies of the Satun religious élites

In Satun, despite the greater emphasis given to religion by Muslims, religious explanations recurred also in the words of Buddhists. Both views resorted to an ultimate human

responsibility, either in the form of the transgression of a superhuman law or as the result of a foolish encroachment upon the natural equilibrium.

People belonging to the intellectual religious élites offered spontaneous mutual reflections and assessments. From the meetings with three Buddhist abbots I obtained the clear distinction of causes into nature and *karma*, even when the assimilation of the law of *karma* to the laws of physics was implicit. The tsunami was considered to be caused exclusively by natural mechanisms and not *karma* (Interviews n. 17, 20, 23). One abbot specified that Buddhism does not have any explanation for this phenomenon, setting it outside the religious sphere of competence. Other statements referred instead to other motives which are present at the popular level. One such example is an ancient story which an abbot recalled from his childhood as told by the elders about the existence of a mythical creature living in the oceanic abysses, a gigantic fish called Anon (อานนท์), which would cause colossal waves when it moved (Interview n. 20). He also had another version which many people in the past referred to:

When a person with an abnormally great amount of merits is to be born, a natural cataclysm announces it. As for Buddha and Jesus, a new prophet for the Buddhists. (Interview n. 20)

The statement above is associated with the messianic expectation of the next Buddha, the Maitreya. Contact with the Messiah would give people the possibility to reach nirvana, bypassing the discipline and renunciation normally required to attain it (Obeyesekere 1968, p.36). In relation to the arrival of a Buddhist prophet, the same abbot also considered the tsunami a warning sign on the condition of human morality. As such, the explanation would be more similar to a universal retributive theodicy.

This same Buddhist abbot thought that people were not satisfied with a chain of causal regression that did not offer an answer about a specific agent, and provided a spontaneous comparison with the Islamic view, in these terms:

People want to have an answer on the origin of this power. Muslims believe it was a powerful agent to cause this, but I personally believe in the scientific explanation. Buddhism connects law of *karma* to nature. Muslims follow the law of God, like the Christians. They follow laws created by God, they believe in the Creation. But Buddhism connects the laws to Nature.

The abbot proposes an opposition between nature-science-Buddhism on the one hand and God-Islam-Christianity on the other. The explanations provided by Islamic clerics, stressed the impermanence of the Creation and personal responsibility (offering some points of contact with the Buddhist position). One imam expressed a view which combines free will in accordance with divine justice (as does the typical position of the Mu'tazilites) by saying, 'The Creation changes continuously. Allah can make everything but it passes through human action first' (Interview n. 19).

The idea of retribution was promptly compared to the doctrine of *karma*. As an imam said:

The law of *karma* is similar as it has to do with retribution for human action. With *karma* negative actions hit always back. For Islam it is slightly different as many people who died did not do anything wrong. *Karma* cannot have a power on its own, it needs an agent. Tsunami, as well as Hurricane Katrina, are warnings. (Interview n. 19)

In this excerpt the theodicy problem emerges in all its force. In the imam's view, the law of *karma* would explain individual fate and would therefore attribute a personal 'responsibility' to each victim. As he acutely noted, according to the doctrine of *karma* there are no innocent victims at the individual level; in one way or another, a person is paying off a *karmic* debt in a context of cosmic impersonal justice. The retribution and justice envisioned by Islam are here instead of a personalistic kind. As I have showed above the idea of the impersonal fate and retribution is present also in Islamic traditions, so that the imam's reflection marks a difference between religions but also within Islam. Another aspect of theodicy, the contrast between the omnipotence and goodness of God, emerged in another statement, by an *alim*:

Everything is created by Allah. If humans commit sins, they are punished. For example with *balaq* [annihilation]. But when this happens we should not attribute emotions to Allah, it is only men's responsibility. God is always merciful. (Interview n. 40)

This passage expresses a free-will theodicy, fully developed in Christianity by St. Augustine (354–430 CE), and which 'proposes to explain all the evils in the world as either directly due to evil acts of human free will to divine punishment for evil acts of human free will' (Howard-Snyder, Bergmann and Rowe 1997, p.135)

When addressing this problem in relation to the perishing of innocents in the tsunami, the *alim* drew a comparison with the sacred scriptures (probably the *hadith*), recalling a passage portraying Musa (Moses) mulling over the same problem, the death of innocents, when suddenly he felt a stinging pain on his feet. Musa looked down and saw hundreds of ants. He stamped on the floor and killed many of them, even those that had not bitten him. The *alim* explained the tsunami's toll of victims in the same way. God wanted to strike some sinners and many died because they just found themselves in the same places (Interview n. 40). In this indiscriminate strike lies the value of the eschatological idea of moral perfection, as expressed in Irenaean types of theodicy (Hick 1997). In a world where calamities struck only the morally bad and rewarded the morally good,

...truly moral action, action done because it is right, would be impossible. The fact that natural evil is not morally directed, but is a hazard which comes by chance, is thus an intrinsic feature of a person-making world. (Hick 1997, p.278)

Only in our kind of world human actions have moral significance (Hick 1997, p.274–275). The subject of corrupted morality was central to many interpretations given by my informants. The theme of the cleansing of dirty places recurred in many interviews and conversations. It is a discourse on moral pollution which can be compared to other ideas of physical pollution in Islam, and to the means utilized to regain purity. 'In brief, the purity of the soul is derived from physical purity which, if defiled, must be purified by "absolute water"' (Khuri 2001, p.30). This specific kind of water is what nature delivers in the form of 'rainfall, springs, floods, melting snow, running water, or mineral water' (Khuri 2001, pp.30–31). In Islam purification by absolute water is necessary following minor defilement such as defecation and urination by washing arms, face and feet (and is then called in Arabic *wudū*); and in case of major defilement such as intercourse, masturbation, menstruation, parturition, death or touching the dead, by bathing (and is called *ghusl*) (Khuri 2001, p.31; Lemos 2009, p.246). If this elaboration applies to the case of tsunami, the enormous amount of absolute water released over Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia and the Andaman coast interpreted by local people in Satun as 'cleaning dirty places' would underlie the twofold dimension of this purification. Local people considered the cleaning both in a material and in a moral sense, as pouring its force over places which they considered contaminated by the practice of illicit sexuality. Analysing the relation set by Mary Douglas (1984) between the physical body, the social body and the construction of social boundaries, Tracy Lemos also states that contrary to

Douglas' ethnographic examples 'Islamic conceptions of purity are individualistic and largely revolve around prayer, not particular places or particular classes of persons' (Lemos 2009, p.239, 245). Lemos uses as main source on ritual purity in Islam Marion Holmes Katz's *Body of text*, in which the extension of individual purity and pollution to the social level is instead clearly expressed with reference to the political and sexual semantic clusters of the Arabic root '*f-t-n*'.

"*Fitna*" is a multivalent term denoting sexual or moral temptation, dissension, conflict, or chaos. It is associated with the social breakdown caused by civil strife, and thus came to be the most common Arabic term used to designate the interludes of internecine warfare that repeatedly rent apart the early Islamic community. (Katz 2002, p.189)

In this sense, the term used to denote sexual temptation and civil chaos would be associated with production of intra-community boundaries. These considerations are important when reading some of the passages from the interviews conducted in Satun and which discuss boundaries referring to both ritual and moral purity to assert the existence of a distinction outside and within the Islamic community.

The entanglement: Uses of theodicy and popular culture as context-bound

People's statements in terms of theological reflections and cultural products are not only discourses on the universal implication of an event but also strictly context-dependent. They should be analysed bearing in mind the coexistence of different ethnic groups, specific local histories and social processes, especially when, in the aftermath of a disaster, the cultural scene is constituted as a battleground (cf. Couch 2000, pp.26–28, 31; Paton et al. 2008, p.118). A good example is the use of retributive theodicy by Islamic clergy and politicians in Indonesia following the Krakatoa eruption and tsunami in 1883, interpreted by the local *ulama* as a divine judgment on colonial rule. This reading of the event was facilitated also by the predictions that a Sufi mystic, Haji Abdul Karim, had made years before and which were fulfilled by the almost exact sequence of events. The revolt that ensued put an end to Dutch rule (Sugirtharajah 2007, pp.119–120). The role natural disasters can play in political conflicts has been evidenced also after the tsunami of 2004 with the resolution of the long conflict in

Aceh, an acceleration of a political process which was already on the way, and the increased bitterness of the conflict in Sri Lanka (Le Billon and Waizenegger 2007).

The magnitude of the 2004 catastrophe in Aceh needed an explanation. Among local Acehnese the consideration of the disaster as Allah's punishment was widespread, although also other explanations were offered (Gaillard et al. 2008). In Satun, people tried to provide an explanation of why Aceh was so harshly hit. An imam I spoke with said:

Yes, also a lot of Muslims died, but they were Muslims only by name, they did not really follow Allah. Also a lot of Hindus died in Aceh. Indonesia! Like Phuket, Krabi, they are dirty places. (Interview n. 8)

This idea was proposed also by other people, for example by a fisherman:

[Indonesians] believe in something else [than Allah]. They believe in foreigners, in the people from Bangkok. There were many hotels where people went to sleep [i.e., to have sexual intercourse]. Look at what happened in Phi Phi, but the places where there are good Muslims nothing happened. Locations which are very close to the places which were totally destroyed, for example Ko Panyii in Phangnga Province. It is just a village, no hotel, nothing happened there. (Interview n. 37)

The boundaries here are moral and territorial; the appropriate moral behaviour of local Muslims would have set an invisible moral curtain against the fury of the sea (and the wrath of God). This statement reminds of what Sohail H. Hashmi recognizes as the basic criterion to establish social boundaries in Islam, *taqwa*.

Taqwa conveys the sense of being constantly aware of God's presence in one's life; it encapsulates both inner faith as well as outward action. Religion itself then becomes a creator of boundaries, the one separating those cultivating *taqwa* and those rejecting it. (Sohail 2003, p.206)

These views were shared by others. The state of morality in Aceh was contextualized historically by the *alim* I interviewed.

Alim: If people in a village follow Allah, He will give them blessing [*barakah*]. The tsunami arrived in places where people commit sins. Such places are Phuket, Krabi, Phangnga and Aceh.

Claudia: Why Aceh?

A: A lot of Muslims died there. Already before the tsunami there were numerous stories circulating about the moral status of Indonesia, and of Aceh in particular.

C: How can that be? Was not Aceh considered the veranda of Islam?

A: In the past, but nowadays the Muslims of Aceh follow the *shirk*. It started with the conflict between Indonesia and Aceh, because of the war there are no *ulama* in Aceh anymore, they have either left or been killed. (Interview n. 40)

A man who was participating during this meeting added that the 'real Islam' nowadays is in Southern Thailand, where there are *ulama* whose presence contributes to the maintenance of morality and therefore, in a sense, creates protection against God's wrath (Interview n. 40). Sulaiman, the VCD maker, told me that he associated the earthquake which generated the tsunami with the oil drilling in Indonesia. The greedy exploitation of the precious reserve and the avidity for money, both contrary to Islam, speak to the corrupted state of international companies as well as local Muslims (Interview n. 11). By the same reasoning, several local Muslims also related the tsunami to Hurricane Katrina and considered the latter God's punishment against the Americans for the atrocities of the Iraq war and invasion, and the mirage of oil. Following another earthquake in Indonesia on 27 May 2006, a group of fishermen in Satun found the news very frightening, adding that 'one day Indonesia will disappear'. One man in the group said that if he lived in Indonesia he would take the decision to emigrate (Interview n. 42). These excerpts address an institutional or 'structural' human sinfulness, which is ultimately held responsible for the disaster (Chester 1998, pp.487, 492; Chester 2005, p.324; Chester and Duncan 2007, p.216; Kazen 2006, p.24; Sugirtharajah 2007, p.128).

A female Buddhist medical officer working in Thung Wa District referred to the general concern of Thai people with a famous prediction by Moo Jom (a well-known Thai astrologist and diviner), according to which Thailand will lose its southern region during the present century. She said that when the tsunami hit, people thought about the prophecy. Upon listening to this statement, my first reaction was to ponder whether such a prediction would not rather be considered linked to the actual political threat Thailand has been facing for ages, that is to say the presence of ethno-political separatist or insurgent groups in the restive Muslim provinces. I voiced my doubt and the Muslim officer presiding over the meeting silently looked at me; no one else present replied, and the question was dropped amid polite smiles (Interview n. 29).

References to signs indicating the supernatural origin of the tsunami were widespread among Muslims. My friend Amin showed me some pages of a Malaysian newspaper, *Berita Harian*, whose supplement *Dimensi*, published on 9 October 2005, reported several pictures

of natural phenomena on which the name of Allah was inscribed. Among these the most noteworthy were an eggshell, the inner part of a tomato, the tsunami waves in Kalutara (Sri Lanka), clouds, a fish, a beehive. To explain these phenomena, the authors of the article reported verses of the Qur'an where these events are described, among which Ar-Rahmān (55:3–6) indicates that all Creation adores Allah. An adoring nature was something that returned in the words of a woman from a fishing village in Satun, who told me that before the tsunami the branches of the palm trees were bent as in prayer, for which she used the term *sujud*, prostration (Interview n. 38). The most famous of these signs in Nature remains the satellite picture of the receding tsunami wave in Kalutara (south-western Sri Lanka) which was readily interpreted as replicating the Arabic for Allah in the billows. The picture was downloaded and diffused also in Satun. A copy of it, accompanied by Chinese text, was displayed on a billboard by the owner of a coffee shop where I used to eat.⁴ The image has been interpreted by several Muslim communities as a specific warning and/or punishment meant for the Muslims (Sugirtharajah 2007, p.126). Posters portraying mosques standing in the midst of annihilation in Meulaboh and Kuede Tenon and with texts in Bahasa Indonesia identifying the tsunami as an act of God also circulated in Satun (Merli 2005, p.164).

The satellite picture of the Kalutara wave has been inserted into the second and third of the VCDs produced by Sulaiman, together with scenes of destruction in Khao Lak which he filmed two days after the tsunami. He also interviewed several people in Phangnga Province. The key element of these VCDs is represented by his commentaries on footage taken from materials available on the web, and his references to verses of the Qur'an to illustrate his interpretation of the phenomenon as warning for the Day of Doom. The selection of specific verses of the Qur'an to support theodicy towards specific social and political goals dates back to the Umayyad rulers (Sachedina 1999, p.66). Thus, the question is: what is the specific intent of Sulaiman and who is the target? He declared his aim as overtly pedagogical; the VCD was meant for teaching the *madrassa*'s students, who later spread the information. Only after some time did the demand for the video lead him to consider selling it (Interview n. 11).

The three versions of the VCD, although similar in content, offer very different editing cuts. The first opens with recitations of Sura accompanied by still drawings describing the signs of the Qiyamat Day; the second version opens with footage of the tsunami wave from different locations across the Indian Ocean. The teacher explained:

I made the second version because if there are verses from the Qur'an at the beginning people would lose interest. People are more interested in the wave itself, they want to know what it was like when the wave

struck. I inserted the verses after this part. After seeing the waves, people become more interested in reading and remembering the Qur'an. [. . .] Thus, people can know that this was really from Allah, even if Muslims do not like it. The Qur'an contains everything and it is true. I did not have specific discussions with the students here, but after watching the VCD they said, 'This is from Allah, it is like what that *Sura* in the Qur'an describes.' Many students came to buy the VCD and after started believing more in the Qur'an. I have a method, I teach that religion and science meet. (Interview n. 11)

These VCDs are an example of that popular culture of disasters which effectively reflects people's views and represents a fecund field of research (Couch 2000, p.22; Webb, Wachtendorf and Eyre 2000, pp.7–8, 13). These kinds of products also shape popular views according to official local religious interpretations; 'the definitions that "win" will influence the overall perception of the event, how its history will be written, and what if any structural changes will come out of it' (Couch 2000, p.26).

However, to win the minds and hearts of the students to the religious interpretations, something else was more relevant: the interviews with people in a Muslim village near Thap Lamu naval base in Phangnga Province, whose houses were destroyed. The cameraman films the Islamic graveyard whose gates and walls were damaged but whose gravestones remained intact. In introducing the villagers, Sulaiman talks about 'our Muslim brothers' and points to places where houses were levelled. Initially he provides a positive presentation, emphasizing the religious observance of the villagers, with the sound of the Azan calling to prayer in the background. He then adds, 'But when Allah wants to send destruction He does not make distinctions about who you are' (Transcript VCD 3). Then, Sulaiman turns his attention to other details in the landscape, casting a shadow on the Muslim brothers' image.

This place in the past was a Karaoke bar. Even in this village! Then Allah wanted to destroy it, in fact it is located very near the Muslim graveyard. This is the [intact] graveyard and this is the village which Allah wiped out. This is a tomb of an old man in this village, they respected him very much, they built this beautiful building to bury his body. In the past they had many candles and incense here [on the rim of a large stone, as a sarcophagus there is a small candle]. This is *shirk*! [another voice from the group]. [Sulaiman:] I do not object when people go to visit graveyards, but when they build *shirk* and believe it to have power to ordain everything like if it was Allah, I cannot accept it, because it cannot be like this. (Transcript VCD 3)

All of a sudden the very observant community revealed at its heart the presence of a place of entertainment, which in Thailand is often associated with more or less obvious prostitution. It also revealed a place where people performed ritual forms of devotion to a

pious person, which scriptural Islam considers falling into associationism, the most heinous sin, destroying monotheism and attacking the omnipotence of God. The film ends with a scene of a few women under a big tent, praying, and a statement by Sulaiman: 'Even if your houses were destroyed or the earthquake hit, or the sky fell down you have to pray. Our sisters are praying under the tent.'

Conclusions

The importance of religious discourses and theodicy in the aftermath of disasters is not limited to their value as general explanations of such events, nor to their significance in contributing to the capacity of a community to recover and to deal with the consequences of the catastrophe. These discourses are seldom mere theological speculations and should instead be analysed in relation to the local context, in which they assume a specific meaning in defining a local community and its sense of identity with respect both to other local communities and to other national or extra-national ones. This is to understand the 'hidden history' of religious responses (Chester and Duncan 2007, p.212; Chester, Duncan and Dibben 2008, p.216). Such a history in Satun is the opposition between a literalist and modernist interpretation of the Islamic doctrine on the one hand, and on the other the presence of rituals and beliefs which are a sign of syncretism and 'hybridization'⁵ (Pattana 2005), threatening the moral purity of the community. Lower Southern Thailand, for the presence of the *ulama* is portrayed as the stronghold of real Islam, of a community where God is present. The partial destruction of the Muslim village on the upper Andaman coast is a warning to return to the folds of ritual orthodoxy.

People weave together different theodicies. This multiplicity derives from the theodicy problem itself, since espousing one explanation (retribution, rather than human free will, etc.) would call into question one of the attributes of deity (justice, omnipotence, mercifulness). In presenting their views Muslims and Buddhists reflect on their respective theodicies, and in pointing to the similarities and differences they define who they are with respect to the other, setting social boundaries. These kinds of reflections are the result of the local composition of the population, the territory they share and their history. The material I have presented in this article shows how the local Muslim community in Satun would consider the affected areas, whether inhabited by Muslims, visited by tourists, or exploited for greedy or illicit profits, using different theodicies. Shunning a univocal causal explanation of the tsunami as a natural disaster (as many Buddhists doubtless accepted), Muslims' attempt to combine scientific and

theological explanations serves aims of disciplining the self and the other, by stressing the ultimate human responsibility for such events. There is the attempt to reconcile other-worldly and this-worldly, to create a new theodicy.

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Notes

¹ I interviewed the imams of some of the villages hit by the wave, one famous Islamic cleric (sing. *alim*, pl. *ulama*) who is also the headmaster of a renowned *madrasa*, the teacher who produced the VCDs, and the abbots of the three leading Buddhist temples of the provincial capital. I did not extend the investigation to the Buddhist population of Satun, as they were not for the most part directly exposed to the damage of the coastal areas.

² 1 *rai* = 1,600 square metres.

³ The sentence is in Abū Dāwūd *Sunna* b.16.

⁴ The satellite pictures are still available on the webpage <http://www.globalsecurity.org/eye/andaman-sri-lanka.htm>.

⁵ Pattana refers to the phenomenon in the context of popular Buddhism, but it applies as well to Islam, and especially in southern Thailand, where the long coexistence and shared history of Buddhists and Muslims has produced an interesting permeation of the respective cosmological worlds (see Merli 2008).